PERCEPTIONS OF LITERACY AMONG SCHOOL CHILDREN OF DIFFERENT AGES

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the perceptions of school children regarding the meaning of reading and writing in the world, using the conversation analysis approach (Hutchby & Wooffit, 1998). Analysis focused on three main questions: (1) How do children perceive the role of reading and writing in the world? (2) What literate discursive skills do children reveal in their reflective discourse? (3) What differences emerge between the perceptions and components exhibited by 7-year-old children, who have just entered the formal education system, versus 12-year-old children, who have just undergone the transition from elementary school to middle school? Qualitative methodology was used to identify the two age groups’ various perceptions, and quantitative methodology was used to compare the two age groups’ frequency of different perceptions.

Findings pinpointed seven categories of literacy perceptions, four identified previously by Peled-Elhanan (2007) among school children in Grades 1-7 (functional, practical-social, purposeful, and cultural-academic) and three identified in the present study (self-enrichment, virtual traveler, and literacy as an instrument for processing feelings). Clear-cut differences emerged between the two age groups in the following dimension: distancing levels increased with age, the diversity of perception increased with age. The degree of perception represents the distancing levels, as well as the meta-literacy awareness. The current outcomes may help deepen pedagogical understanding about the importance of targeted exposure to the roles of reading and writing, in order to strengthen literacy in school-age children.

The children’s literacy components during their discourse are classified along the contextualization axis. Speech with includes distancing levels reflect the child’s ability to further herself from the immediate context of the conversation, and thus produce literacy abilities. In addition, other components facilitate the production of literate extended discourse: extended turns – which broaden and expand ideas in the conversation, the use of thinking verbs which indicate meta-pragmatic thinking. These issues were not analyzed in a systematic and quantitative way in this paper, but were observed in the qualitative analysis.

The paper focuses on two main aspects viewed in the childrens' speech: perceptions and contextualization. Thus, the framework of this paper is based on two main components:

(1) Perception is viewed along the perception axis, showing the children's perceptions about literacy in the world, as measured along an axis ranging from instrumental and personal to broad or global. (2) The contextualization aspect is viewed by means of literate discursive skills. These skills serve as indicators of academic potential, containing the presence of literacy components in the children's discourse. They include the ability to create "extended discourse", in genres such as: definitions, narration of stories, explanations, etc.. In addition, the use of metapragmatic components, such as thinking verbs (e.g., think, feel, believe), is prevalent in the speech of literate discourse.

KEYWORDS: Meta, Language, Literacy, Literate Discourse, Literate Perceptions
INTRODUCTION
Perceptions of Literacy Among School Children of Different Ages

The following sample transcript from a semi-structured interview with a first-grader, Rona (age 7:04), illustrates the current subject of study and method of analysis. This example illustrates Rona’s perception of the meaning of reading and writing (see Appendix for transcription rules):

INTERVIEWER: Do you know why people read and write?

RONA: To understan’nd > if I’m going into first grade and- > -I don’t know how to read↓ then it won’t– I won’t lea↑rn like: > like I’m supposed to.>

INTERVIEWER: =m right. And:? and: but : but maybe someone can uh: um read to↑ you? Things: someone:

RONA: Yeah I- if I go to school and I don’t (exactly) and- I don’t↑ know how to read yet- What, like is my mom gonna have to come wi-th me to- school and- read↑ to me?

In this excerpt, Rona talked about the necessity of reading and writing for everyday functioning within the school system. Alongside this emphasis – situated in the “here and now” – Rona also revealed thinking that was more distanced from her immediate reality, staking out a future goal. She stressed that reading and writing form the basis for the ability to advance from one grade to the next in school, and that they are essential for adequate academic functioning: "then it won’t– I won’t lea↑rn like: > like I’m supposed to.> " She also emphasized the importance of literacy tools; by reading she will become an independent and mature person, in line with the school’s expectations for her age: "What, like is my mom gonna have to come wi-th me to- school and- read↑ to me? " Rona’s transcript shows how she articulated her thoughts intermittently, as she spoke, without seeming to formulate a fluent theme. However, a deeper look at her text beyond the fragmented structure of her answers suggests that Rona presented a generalized concept, emphasizing the roles of reading and writing in her immediate world as well in the familiar world of school.

The current study addressed the literacy perceptions of first and seventh graders through qualitative and quantitative analysis, particularly of children’s views on how reading and writing characterize literate thinking (Blum-Kulka and Hamo, 2010). These two age groups represent the upper and lower boundaries of primary school. The current study mapped out the contents of the children’s reflective observations concerning the importance of reading and writing in the world. In addition, the study analyzed the complexity and sophistication of children’s literate discourse along a perception axis, which ranges from the "here and now" to extended discourse of distant themes.

THE PRESENT STUDY CONTEXT: A FRAMEWORK FOR THE EXAMINATION OF LITERACY CHARACTERISTICS

Blum-Kulka and Hamo (2010) defined literacy as the ability to use the spoken and written texts that are found in, created by, and perceived as essential by society, and valued over generations. Olson (1996) asserted that literacy encourages reciprocity between spoken and written language. His studies underscored that literacy competence helps achieve social and personal goals and refines the knowledge needed for active participation in society. Watson (2001) accentuated the substantial influence of spoken language skills in particular on individuals’ eventual acquisition of the full range of literacy skills. According to Blum-Kulka and Hamo (Blum-Kulka & Hamo, 2010) the command of literacy skills help refine the students’ knowledge, and with it can help them achieve personal goals, and contribute to active participation in society. The presence of literacy components in children's discourse is an indication of academic potential, and therefore
identification of literacy discourse components by the students can help improve their performance as writers and readers, and thereby lead to such success. I next elaborate on two components of literate texts (which in principle can emerge in both spoken and in written texts): the perception axis which presents reflective discourse on literacy from the children's perspective, and components of literacy along the contextualization axis.

**Perceptions of the Children on Literacy: Reflective Discourse on Literacy From Children's Perspective**

Research analyzing peer talk found that children ages 4 to 12 years spontaneously use reflective discourse – the ability to verbalize metacognitive and metalinguistic processes – and also spontaneously engage in extended discourse (Avni-Schön, 2010). Researchers highlighted that students' ability to report and verbalize thoughts plays a crucial role in promoting learning processes and academic success (Avni-Schön, 2010; Peled-Elhanan 2002, 2007). Learners who speak about their thoughts and the thoughts of others become better learners.

The ability to analyze the meaning of reading and writing processes is fundamentally a metapragmatic skill, which focuses on the use of language and on language itself. Children develop linguistic awareness in response to parents', teachers', and peers' metapragmatic reflective comments, aimed at understanding language and language-dependent life domains such as learning processes and literacy acquisition (Aukrust, 2003; Blum-Kulka, Huck-Taglicht, & Avni, 2004).

In her analysis of teachers' dialogical conversations with children in kindergarten and elementary school, Peled-Elhanan (2002, 2007) examined the children's perceptions regarding literacy and its role in their lives, alongside their perceptions of other non-scholastic subjects. In this study we expand on Peled-Elhanan's research and examine Hebrew native speakers, rather than immigrant children, in two age groups, using a broader point of view of perceptions. While Peled-Elhanan found and analyzed four perceptions visible in the children's responses, we found in our data perceptions which did not fit these categories, and therefore we extended the profile of perceptions according to our findings. The difference lies perhaps in the fact that the children in this study are native speakers of Hebrew, and some of them are older in age. Methodologically, both studies use similar methods.

Her analysis identified two broad literacy perceptions, autonomous literacy and contextualized literacy, which led to the classification of four perceptions of literacy as related to reading and writing: (1) the functional perception, which identifies literacy as a tool for technical orientation and success in school; (2) the practical-social perception, which targets social and scholastic advancement; (3) the purposeful perception, aimed at life outside of school; and (4) the cultural-academic perception, which relates to expanding knowledge (Peled-Elhanan, 2002, 2007).

**Components of Literacy along the Contextualization Axis**

This paper refers to two types of components of literacy discourse – the actual skills involved in literacy (beyond the classical definitions of literacy, i.e., decoding, spelling, grammar, etc.), and the metalinguistic and metacognitive abilities – the ability to account for and reflect on these skills. In this section, our goal is to analyze the complexity and sophistication of the children's literate discourse along the contextualization axis. The rationale for examination the children's speech along this axis is to observe, and try to understand the literacy orientation of the children, even when not explicit. We attempt to show how the speech components of the children link with their literate discursive skills. Literacy discourse incorporates multiple components, including the following abilities: to converse, read, and write about subjects that are distant from the here and now; to understand structurally and linguistically complex texts; to articulate ideas clearly and precisely; to tell stories; to give explanations; to define concepts and words; to make arguments; and more – all the while adapting the level of explicitness to the target audience (Blum-Kulka & Hamo, 2010).
Conversing, reading, and writing can vary as a function of the thematic anchor's distance from the here and now – from the immediate context of the conversation or text. More distant, abstract, and complex topics require stronger linguistic explanatory tools, thereby necessitating greater literacy capabilities (Ninio & Snow, 1996). "Contextualized discourse" takes place around a shared world of concepts within a closed group in the here and now and is understood primarily by those group members (Bernstein, 1996; Blum-Kulka & Hamo, 2010; Blum-Kulka & Snow, 1992; Vardi-Rat & Avni-Schön, 2010). At times, contextualized discourse resembles spontaneous casual conversation, which also assumes shared references and familiarity between interlocutors. At the other end of the contextualization axis, "distanced discourse" occurs far away from the here and now, with a broad and less intimate target audience. It resembles academic discourse, which requires more explicitness and distancing in place and time (Snow, Porche, Tabors, & Harris, 2007).

"Extended discourse" refers to a text with a number of structurally and linguistically complex turns or utterances, formulated clearly and with precise words. Such a text requires participants' understanding of topics beyond the here and now and is manifested in genres such as explanation, narrative, argument, and so forth (Blum-Kulka & Hamo, 2010; Snow et al., 2007).

METHODOLOGY

The Current Study Design and Objectives

The current study examined the reflective observations of children in two age groups regarding the meaning and roles of reading and writing in the world, using the conversation analysis approach (Hutchby & Wooffit, 1998) and qualitative and quantitative methodologies. Analysis of personal oral interviews with the first graders and seventh graders yielded data on: (a) children's perceptions of literacy, which were classified along a broad spectrum ranging from instrumental needs within the school setting to extra-scholastic needs and their connection to broad uses in the world; and (b) the presence of literacy components in the children's discourse (e.g., definition, explanation, narrative, argument, etc.) as indicators of potential literate competence, which were classified along the contextualization axis – the spectrum ranging from the "here and now" to extended discourse on distant themes.

Analysis focused on three main questions: (1) How do children perceive the role of reading and writing in the world? (2) What literate discursive skills do children reveal in their reflective discourse? (3) What differences emerge between the perceptions and components exhibited by 7-year-old children, who have just entered the formal education system, versus 12-year-old children, who have just undergone the transition from elementary school to middle school? Qualitative methodology was used to identify the two age groups' various perceptions, and quantitative methodology was used to compare the two age groups' frequency of different perceptions.

Participants

The present sample included 47 children – 26 first graders and 21 seventh graders – All participants were native Hebrew speakers from middle-class socioeconomic backgrounds who had normative language skills and attended regular public schools.

Data Collection Procedure

Each child underwent an individual semi-structured interview based on the “literate profile” structure (Peled-Elhanan, 2002), which included free conversation as well as attempts to converse about reading and writing habits. To create a feeling of casual conversation, the interviewer asked children about their hobbies and everyday lives and responded about those subjects, while also incorporating the preplanned interview questions into the conversation.
Perceptions of Literacy among School Children of Different Ages

The planned questions were as follows: Who writes? Who reads? Why do people read and write? Can you name a book you liked when you were little? What are the titles of the books that you remember? Can you name the authors? All interviews were audio- and video-recorded.

Data Analysis

Interviews underwent transcription according to the standard rules of conversation analysis (Hacohen & Hamo, 2002), as seen in the Appendix. The first step of analysis consisted of isolating children’s statements in response to the study questions about why people read and write. Each coherent set of statements (ranging from one to several statements) that focused on a single observation about literacy (henceforth called a “perception”) served as the unit of analysis. This step yielded a total of seven perceptions, given by first graders and seventh graders all together. Some children’s transcripts contained one perception, but most contained multiple perceptions.

Second, to categorize these perceptions, I combined a theory-oriented approach with a data-oriented approach. Thus, I identified a total of seven categories matching the contents raised by the interviewed children. These included four categories identified previously by Peled-Elhanan (2007) among school children in Grades 1-7 (functional, practical-social, purposeful, and cultural-academic, with modifications in the categories’ definitions as dictated by the current data) and three new categories that emerged from the present data on first and seventh graders (self-enrichment, virtual traveler, and literacy as an instrument for processing feelings).

These perceptions varied substantially in content, with some perceptions focusing on everyday needs for reading and writing, some mentioning their instrumental purposes, and some expounded on a wide variety of global literacy uses. Thus, in the next step of analysis, I situated these seven categories at different places along the axis of perception, varying from the immediate, concrete “here and now” to the more remote, abstract, distant world, as seen in Figure 1. As mentioned above, more distanced perceptions indicated children’s more developed literate thinking.

Next, to validate my analysis, I invited a leading expert in the principles for identifying met-pragmatic discursive statements to independently code 10 of the interview transcripts using the seven categories. She had previously encoded children’s conversations using a genre mapping scheme (Blum-Kulka, 2005; Blum-Kulka et al., 2004). Kappa index of reliability between the two judges was high (Kappa = .85).

After classifying each relevant set of statements (literacy perception) by each child into one of the seven categories, I also calculated each perception category for each child. Chi-square tests were conducted to compare the percentage of children in the two age groups who mentioned each category. For each child, I also calculated an overall perception-variety rating by counting the number of categories that appeared in that child's interview transcript, on a scale of 0 to 7, and examined age differences using t-test.
FINDINGS

In this section, I describe each of the seven categories identified via conversation analysis, along with the frequencies found for each category for each age group.

The Seven Literacy Perception Categories

The following describes the seven categories that match the contents raised by the interviewed children, along with the percentages of children in each age group who mentioned each of these perception categories, and followed by an illustration of children who included multiple categories in their discourse. Excerpts from children’s discourse were translated from Hebrew to English, and names were changed to preserve anonymity.

The Functional Perception

The first of the seven perceptions, located clearly in the here and now of the perception axis, views literacy as a tool for every-day orientation and success in school and in the familiar scholastic environment (based on Peled-Elhanan, 2007). The vast majority of the younger children (89%) referred to reading and writing as a necessary tool for meeting school requirements. According to Dana (age 6;04): “Sometimes I [write because- I have homework, [ah] and sometimes I write just because.”

In another first-grader’s example, Itamar (age 6;09) talked about the uses of reading within his specific reading-acquisition program: “You read (0) uh:, about newspapers, and Litaf ((Itamar’s reading curriculum)). A:hi, you draw a circle in- from- in- (a bo’ok’) and- next to the- circle (...). (0) you write in the little little circle.” Itamar, who was preoccupied with his immediate reality of reading acquisition and school-related activities, equate the essence of reading with the particular work he performed in his workbooks, including circling things and writing answers inside the circle. His misconception of reading as drawing circles around words in a workbook, and was evident from his emphasis of the word “draw” (draw) and de-emphasis of “book” (a bo’ok’). The circle that Itamar deemed so important in his description of the functions of reading is based on the popular school experience of circling “correct” answers. This type of activity locates the children’s reading activity in the technical experience, rather than in the content level of reading and writing.

In comparison, a lower but still substantial percentage (38%) of the preadolescents (seventh graders) also referred to reading and writing as a necessary tool for orientation in the familiar and immediate school environment: “You read and write to pass notes and do homework.” Yet, the two age groups differed significantly in their frequency of referral to functional perceptions of literacy ($\chi^2 =13.12 ; p< .001$).

Table 1: Comparison of the Two Age Groups’ Literacy Perceptions (in Percentages)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Literacy Perception</th>
<th>Frequency (In Percentages)</th>
<th>X^2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>First Graders (N = 26)</td>
<td>Seventh Graders (N = 21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Functional</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purposeful</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practical-social</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural-academic</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-enrichment</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virtual traveler</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Percentages in the column for each group do not add up to 100% because each child’s transcript may have included multiple perceptions.

* p < .05. ** p < .01. *** p < .001.
The Purposeful Perception

This perception (based on Peled-Elhananan, 2007) views literacy as a tool for managing outside of school, rooted in children’s familiarity with the requirements of the western world and focusing on the goal of social acceptance. In terms of the perception axis, this attribution of a purposeful perception to reading and writing originates in the here and now but looks forward to the adult world, toward social and economic success.

Only 15% of the younger children revealed purposeful perceptions of literacy, and those who did mentioned a variety of immediate purposes for reading and writing. They referred to their immediate surroundings and needs, like the need to read signs or subtitles on television. For example, the personal interview with Idit (age 7;01) demonstrated her purposeful perception of reading and writing as necessary tools for organization, related to the familiar and immediate personal world:

INTERVIEWER: Why is it important?

IDIT: For, for reading. >If they ask us what’s this and we tell them for uh, and- then it’s important if we, when we’ll be grown up and: and: our- children want t- to I dunno, something and- and- we don’t know how to explain to them> and: -and: and: -another thing, and also if we don’t know how to read↑ we won’t understand anything.

INTERVIEWER: Really?#


Idit’s powerful emotional intensity, accelerated speech, and rising volume reflected her adamant championship of reading and writing as a prerequisite for proper parental functioning. She contended that without such literacy knowledge parents cannot help their children navigate in school or function adequately in the future. In addition, by projecting into the very distant future after becoming a mother, Idit demonstrated a great capacity for distancing from the here and now. Her transcript perhaps indicates her understanding of reading and writing as tools for social behavior.

In contrast to the small minority of first graders who cited purposeful perceptions of literacy, over half of the preadolescents (57%) demonstrated a broad conceptualization of the purposeful utility of reading and writing for future functioning in the adult world ($\chi^2 =9.02; \ p .001$). For instance, Shimrit (age 11;11) pinpointed the purposes of literacy using an extended turn and by incorporating a variety of thinking verbs. Thinking verbs are significant literacy components since they specify the way the child, or adult speaker, report about their thinking process. In other words, thinking verbs indicate meta-linguistic abilities.

SHIMRIT: (0) In order to know. #ahhh# not if (0) If I don’t know how to explain it like: I need to know how to read so I can: kno\v- know. Like- to get ahead in the coming yea↑rs- dunno how to explain it... like, so it’s only in the coming yea↑rs (...) uh let’s say you need hi: hi-high school exams. Like you really need to learn to read and write, if someone –doesn’t learn then he’s in for it.

INTERVIEWER: Why? Wh↑y is he in for it? You said that so loudly that he’s in for it, why?

SHIMRIT: Yes, he’s in for it, no, it’s; I don’t know, because it’s important, every, every person needs to learn to read and- to write, it’ll help him for example if he goes to the store, a:: he’ll get th: -bill, he has to pay, =wha: -t he owes ‘let’s say’ then he sees↓ and he: doesn’t understand what it is, and he
doesn’t want to ask the saleslady, let’s say he’s thirty six, old. What does it say here. = ..... it’s an important part of life learning.

In voicing this perception, Shimrit’s tone was bemused, differing from her usual tone. Her words had a rising and falling intonation, as well as many emphases and de-emphases. At first, she said she did not know how to explain why reading and writing are important. Yet later, an adult voice emerged in her speech. Shimrit’s set of statements referred to various purposes for reading and writing at different distances from herself, ranging from her broad statement about the need to be organized in general, to the need to progress in the coming years in her familiar world of school and matriculation exams, and finally to everyday needs at the corner store.

The Practical-Social Perception

This perception of literacy (based on Peled-Elhanan, 2007) views literate practices as a tool for scholastic advancement, the goal of which is social success both in the familiar world and in the distant future world. The practical-social perception lie on the familiar-axis. About one third of each age group referred to the practical-social perception (see Table 1), with no significant differences between the groups. These sets of statements referred to reading and writing as a tool for social advancement, both on the peer level and within the popular culture of the peer group, such as popular television programs, movies, celebrity gossip, and more. Dganit (age 12;05), remarked that she preferred to read: "about the things that girls our age like > and all sorts of stuff like that’". The rising intonation in the sentence (about the things that girls our age like) indicates that Dganit emphasized the social. However, she hesitated regarding the other roles of reading and writing, as seen in her speech’s lowered volume and accelerated pace when saying: ">

Some children proposed broader practical-social frames of reference for literacy. Evyatar (age 11;11), for example, outlined a practical-social perception of literacy as a tool for orientation and success in school, with an added social bonus:

EYVATAR: It:: Well. >like< (0) it’s nice= let’s say at my age I (0) read a lot of newspapers and- it’s then it’s easier for me in-class, let’s say. If I need to read a summary or something like that, then I:: (0) don’t stumble as much (0) as other children:: do, who don’t read anything. Who’re always (0) on the-computer > and-the-televisio... And-also I get praise in class (0), ‘like’ it’s nice. It pays off. I work on it for twenty minutes, half an hour. (0) and:: the’then" it pays off in-, class >like<, (0) I have a good time, >and- all the kids >clap for me, and that.

The Cultural-Academic Perception

The cultural-academic perception lie between the familiar world and the remote world.

This perception views literacy as a tool for the expansion of knowledge and for connecting with the world at large (based on Peled-Elhanan, 2007). None of the first graders mentioned cultural-academic literacy perceptions, whereas about half (52%) of the seventh graders did ($\chi^2 =17.78 ; p .001$).

These older children noted the importance of academic success and its connection with the wider world, and some even referred marginally to social stratification in the western world. The following excerpt illustrates Aviv’s (age 11;07) perspective on the cultural-academic role of reading and writing:

EYVATAR: [so first] it’s first of all a key (0) in my opinion, personal knowledge> in all sorts of things<. Reading the newspaper (0) about famous people, or about economics and- it it develops your
knowledge. [You] know what’s going on in the country, and abroad. All sorts of things like that, the second thing, it also de- develops your: -vocabulary. And: your reading.

The transcript reveals Evyatar’s emphasis on the outside world, as manifested in his accelerated pace of speech (>in-all sorts of things<) and his detail about adult reading worlds that are far away from the world of children: or about economics. Likewise, Evyatar noted that reading offers another bonus: it develops your vocabulary.

The Self-Enrichment Perception

The self-enrichment perception lie on the remote world. This perception of literacy, which emerged in the current study from the present interview data, views reading and writing as a tool for personal enjoyment, as a hobby or as related to leisure time. Only 15% of the younger children revealed self-enrichment perceptions of literacy, whereas almost two thirds (62%) of the older children focused on this aspect of literacy ($\chi^2=10.88; p<.001$). Despite the fact that in the first grade, many school hours per week are dedicated to the acquisition of the basic skills of reading and writing, some of the children revealed their understanding of the enjoyment of the process. Rachel (age 6:05) responded to the interviewer’s question on the purpose of reading and writing in the following way:

**RACHEL:** Maybe (0) they uh – (0) they like to write.

**INTERVIEWER:** Why?

**RACHEL:** And they also want, maybe, for their- children ah For= for the children they know [ha] or for a[ll] the children in the world for them to have fun, [ce] besides, maybe they also enjoy it. Not only the children. Maybe they like to write?

Many seventh graders mentioned their perception of reading as providing personal enjoyment, such as Liat (age 12:00) stated: "There are people, who enjoy reading↑. More than talking, it’s a hobby people have." Some, like Itay (age 6:09), also mentioned the issue of personal taste, where different choices may give pleasure to different people: "0) there are books that st>I start reading< and- I get sick of it, in the middle, and there are bo↑oks that- I if they’re interesting then: I read – them fas[t] [[fast]]." This answer indicates the perception of reading as and activity which entails enjoyment.

The Emotional Processing Perception

The emotional processing perception lie on the remote world. This perception of literacy, which emerged in the current study from the present interview data, views reading and writing as an instrument for processing feelings or coping with emotional dilemmas. Only one of the first graders mentioned this emotional processing literacy perception, and only 14% of the seventh graders did ($\chi^2=3.97; p<.001$). The following is the response of the first grader mentioned above in answer to the question “Why do we read?” Yuval (6:11) answered: "So if they read a story↑, so they won’t be afraid. There i↑f people want to sleep↓, to to put someone to sleep fas↑per so they read them a story↑." Yuval regarded reading as a tool for soothing and coping with fears and difficulties of falling asleep.

The Virtual Traveler Perception

The virtual traveler perception lie on the remote world. This perception of literacy, which emerged in the current study from the present interview data, views reading and writing as a means for traveling or escaping to distant or imagined worlds. None of the first graders mentioned this virtual traveler literacy perception, whereas 29% of the seventh graders verbalized this perception ($\chi^2=8.51; p.001$), like Ronen (age 12:00).
RONEN: It’s also fun, it’s interesting, because: it opens up a new world actually, ya [[you]] read books, and: I can see movies and-and-this But – in books I can take off with my imagination. Like a movie has to hit the person just right > a book, even if it also has to hit you, then there’s the option for imagination, like I make специф movies, and still-we see a book everyone can match it to:: his personality... And when I read a book I: let my imagination:: think.

Ronen spoke eloquently and coherently about the role of reading in his world. To accentuate important points, he used extra-verbal means such as elongated syllables (books), accelerated pace (> <), slowing (< >), emphasis (to hit), rising intonation (>book), and lowering intonation (think). He pinpointed the uniqueness of books versus movies; the latter allow him to journey to new, unique, and personal worlds (It opens up a new world... and everyone can match it to his character, imagination, and desires).

Multiple Literacy Participant

Some of the children presented a single perception, while others raised a wide variety of perceptions in relation to the role of reading and writing in the world. The following example illustrates a multi-faceted perception demonstrating a high level of literate discursive skills that included four out of the seven perceptions. Thus, Ro’i (age 12;02), presented his perceptions of reading and writing through an extended turn that incorporated a variety of distancing levels as well as thinking verbs and metapragmatic aspects:

INTERVIEWER: Why do people read?

RO’I: uh: reading? Uh: : there’s reading for information, that’s in order to know things, ((cultural-academic perception, with the goal of gaining knowledge)) and there’s reading of stories, which is for, enjoyment, for your enjoyment, and doing things during your spare time ((self-enrichment perception, as a tool for pleasure or as a hobby)). And: :you write because, if we want to learn and know things, in-school for example, we need to write ((practical-social perception)). So we can-have a chance, if- we have a test, and-we’re going over the material, we’ll have a chance, to-memorize the material better ((functional perception, to fulfill immediate instrumental needs)).

RO’I: and you write at all for enjoyment (immediate, personal-instrumental circle), there are people who write for their enjoyment. Poets. Compos=ers. I don’t really distinguish here between writing music and- regular writing (distanced and general aspects of reading and writing). Writing music- is a little different because it is: :n’t expressed in:: words, it’s expressed in- sounds.

In this excerpt we see that Ro’i refers to different kinds of writing, from poetry to music, indicating generic understanding which is an important literacy component.

Age Differences in Perceptions’ Frequencies

As seen in Table 1, the first and seventh graders differed significantly in the extent to which they mentioned six of the seven perception categories – all except practical-social perceptions. Significantly more first graders than seventh graders focused on the functional perception of literacy, located in the here and now. In contrast, for the other five significant categories, significantly more seventh graders than first graders included these perceptions in their discourse on literacy. Thus, the literacy perceptions of the seventh graders were broader and more diverse, making room for larger-world perceptions.

I also calculated an overall perception-variety rating for each child (i.e., the total number of categories that
appeared in that child's transcript, from 0 to 7). A t-test for independent samples demonstrated a significant difference between children in the two age groups on their overall perception-variety rating. \( t(45) = 3.34, p < .01 \). Overall, seventh graders' discourse revealed a higher variety of perceptions \( (M = 3.86, SD = 1.76) \) than first graders' \( (M = 1.52, SD = 0.85) \).

**DISCUSSIONS**

The metacognitive ability to analyze and verbalize learning processes constitutes an essential foundation for successful present and future learning. In the current study, school children were asked to evaluate their own point of view on reading and writing processes. Their discourse comprises a metalinguistic process (Snow, Tabors, & Dickinson, 2001) and, as such, it is also literate (Blum-Kulka & Habib, 2010).

The current findings indicated that 7-year-olds and 12-year-olds have already developed a range seven literacy perceptions regarding the roles of reading and writing in the world, as well as different patterns of perceptions for the two age groups. Frequency distributions showed that children in both age groups presented a variety of perceptions about why people read and write, but younger children only generated four perceptions whereas the older children generated seven. Moreover, the vast majority of first graders perceived literacy as serving functional needs, and about one third mentioned the practical-social role of literacy, but very few if any first graders revealed the other literacy perceptions. In contrast, the seventh graders referred to all seven perceptions, predominantly to self-enrichment, cultural-academic, and purposeful roles for literacy.

Beyond the thematic aspect, these perceptions relate to literate abilities in terms of the perception of the discourse. The perceptions of the younger children focused primarily on everyday concrete needs, such as performing tasks in school, and on the familiar day-to-day environment in their immediate circle. The first graders expressed personal, independent, and creative thinking. Perhaps the children's creativity is channeled throughout the years to a formal expected route by the school system.

The older children displayed a more multifaceted and multidimensional view of the roles of reading and writing, which included not only needs for daily functioning but also more distant needs for learning, social coping, social mobility, enjoyment, and even traveling to other worlds of fantasy and fiction. These age differences in children's literacy perceptions can be linked to cognitive-developmental factors—ranging from young children's very concrete observation of their tasks and environment to preadolescents' generalized and distanced observations of the world.

**Pedagogical Implications**

Dialogue on the question of why people read and write furnished a platform for sustaining a literate conversation, for both the interviewer and the school students. Children thereby expanded and distanced, targeted their assumed knowledge of their interlocutor, and used precise language and relevant vocabulary. This experience highlights the importance of maintaining open, personal channels of discourse with school children. The perception axis for literacy perceptions can help teachers understand students' level of self-awareness, literate aspirations, and life aspirations, and use these insights as leverage when designing future literacy development and exposure.

Future educators would do well to provide children with a platform for discourse concerning the importance and the role of reading and writing. Likewise, teachers can hold discussions in small groups in class, develop make-believe stories about reading and writing, read together, write collaborative plays in class, and more. Activities like these will likely raise children’s threshold of literate aspirations.
REFERENCES


Perceptions of Literacy among School Children of Different Ages


APPENDICES

Transcription Rules (Hacohen & Hamo, 2002)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mark</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>. −</td>
<td>Utterance ending with descending intonation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>, −</td>
<td>Utterance ending with ascending, continuing intonation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>? −</td>
<td>Utterance ending with ascending, questioning intonation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wo ↑ rd</td>
<td>Word or syllable containing ascending intonation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wo↓rd</td>
<td>Word or syllable containing descending intonation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word</td>
<td>Accentuated word or syllable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W::ord</td>
<td>Word with a continuing pronunciation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>word</td>
<td>Word(s) pronounced louder than others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>”word”</td>
<td>Word(s) pronounced softer than others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wo--</td>
<td>Word that is interrupted in the middle of pronunciation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>=</td>
<td>Minimal break between the end of one utterance and beginning of the next</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[word]</td>
<td>Overlapping discourse between two speakers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Word(s) pronounced faster than normal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt; word&gt;</td>
<td>Word(s) pronounced slower than normal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Unclear word(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(word)</td>
<td>Word(s) identified by transcriber's estimation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>{ }</td>
<td>Word(s) pronounced differently than normal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#taxt#</td>
<td>Utterance pronounced differently than normal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>